



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

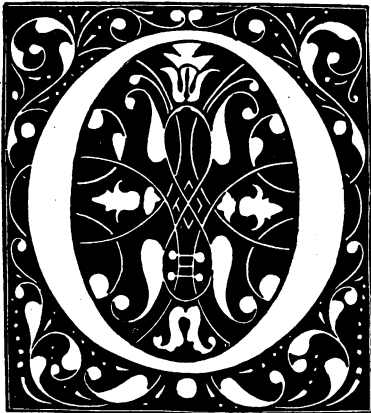
Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE FUTURE OF ART.



OUR time is very generally spoken of as unfavorable to artistic aspirations. "Art is dead," wrote some philosophical German long years ago, "because we have comprehended it." Expanding this formula into its elements, we shall find it to mean, that science has been the death of art, — it is a clear case of vivisection. Science has laid bare so remorselessly the vitals of art in its morbid endeavors to pry into its secrets, that poor art expired under the knife. And not content with killing art, science has usurped the throne of its victim, and now rules with the iron sway of an inexorable despot where formerly its gentle sister guided men by the pleasant delusions with which she knew how to ensnare their minds. A late writer, Mr. J. A. Symonds,¹ has given voice to a similar thought in a less epigrammatic form. According to him, art "has lost its hold upon the centre of our intellectual activity," and "can no longer give form to the ideas that rule the modern world." "It cannot be too often or too emphatically stated," continues Mr. Symonds, "that these arts (that is to say, the figurative arts) produce nothing really great and universal in relation to the spirit of their century, except by a process analogous to the mythopoetic."

It is evident, if these views be correct, and as the age of mythopoetic creations has long passed away, that art must indeed be dead, and it would be a useless task to attempt to galvanize it into life, no matter by what means. However lifelike its actions, it would only be a stalking corpse, which it were best to bury out of sight as quickly as possible. But it may be in order to ask whether we must accept these and other like utterances without a murmur of dissent, and whether these gloomy prophets of a hopeless future are really the bearers of a truthful message.

In the first place, it might perhaps be said that, far from having been comprehended by us, art is still as great a mystery as ever. The definitions of the term which have been attempted by philosophical thinkers are manifold, and differ widely from one another, and we need only look around us among the productions of the day to see how the practical solution of the problem by the artistic workers is sought to be accomplished by the greatest variety of means. But this would be begging the question. Granted that we have comprehended art: — what of it? Is art a juggler's trick which loses its attraction as soon as it has been seen into? Or is it one of the many ways in which we seek the truth? and is the finding of truth, if that be possible to man, to be dreaded as the end of all life?

Nor does it seem to be founded in fact that the mythopoetic process is the only one which can produce great works of art. Greek art did not find the road leading to its highest development in sculpture and painting until after Homer had given clear-cut forms to the shadowy deities of the primitive ages, and had led them forth from the dimness of "metaphor and myth" into the broad sunlight of a more potential humanity; and the Italian art of the Cinquecento arrived at its culminating point only when it had invested the central figures of its faith with all the human beauty that the mind of man is capable of conceiving. It is, in truth, the very mission of art to clear the heavens of the imagination of all transcendental mists, and to give tangible, material form to the ideal, while its attempts to realize metaphor, or myth, or

¹ Renaissance in Italy. The Fine Arts. By John Addington Symonds. New York: H. Holt & Co. 1879.

mysticism, invariably result in the monstrous and the unintelligible. Mr. Symonds himself reasons somewhat in the same strain when he says, that to the Florentine school "was committed the great charge of interpreting the spirit of Italian civilization in all its branches, not for the cloister only or the oratory, but for humanity at large," because it was "distinguished for its intellectual power, its sanity, its scientific industry, its adequacy to average human needs."

Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of art—most comprehensive because one of its terms is so indefinite as to be almost equal to an unknown quantity—is this, that it is simply the effort to give sensible embodiment to the ideal. If we accept this definition, we need have no fears for the future of art. As long as man exists, he will strive after the ideal, seeking the perfect with ever renewed and untiring effort, however often baffled. Hence art can only die with the last of the human race. But it must be admitted that the ideal is not always easily discernible. In periods of transition, in which some men adhere to old faiths, and others tear themselves away from them while the new faith that is to be their light is still hidden from all, or at best but dimly seen by a few,—in which old-established political institutions are subverted, and the whole social fabric is threatened with radical change,—this must necessarily be so. These are the times in which individualism asserts itself. The old highways having been abandoned, and there being no generally recognized leaders to point out new roads, every one must shift for himself. And yet there is more earnest yearning for and striving after the ideal, in these periods of doubt and inquiry, than in those other periods in which mankind with unquestioning faith, and often with unthinking minds, follows in the beaten track marked out by the footprints of its predecessors. It is but natural that this state of things should manifest itself in art. In periods of unity of faith or creed, when all men, or at least the great majority of men, see the ideal under a common form, or from one common point of view, there must naturally be also a unity of art, resulting in great works achieved by the co-operation of many minds and many hands. In periods of doubt, this unity no longer prevails, and the ideal, appearing in a multitude of forms, seems to the superficial observer to have been lost. But, although it may be less sharply defined, more vaguely outlined in the mist of doubt which floats about it, it is nevertheless there. Or is there no ideality, even though it be unconscious, in the endeavors of the best of our modern landscape painters to bring man into closer communion with nature, to open his eyes to the glories of sea and sky and land, and thus to make him happier and better by teaching him to enjoy the beauties which continually surround him? And is there no striving after a more perfect humanity, no protest against the abasement of human faculties in the works of the painters whose themes are chosen from among the poor and the lowly? Indeed, it would not be difficult to show that a picture by Millet, born of unselfish pity, has a far higher ideality than any of the great votive pictures of the old artists, which owe their existence solely to the egotistic anxiety of conscience-stricken souls for their own safety, or those immense frescos on church and grave-yard wall which enforce the teachings of virtue by an appeal to fear.

This want of unity in the views of mankind concerning the fundamental questions of life having steadily increased from the sixteenth century to our own time, it is but natural that the apparent aimlessness of art should be more conspicuous at the present day than ever before. Nor is it to be wondered at that of all countries of the earth the United States should most markedly show the symptoms of this condition; for while a certain degree of uniformity at least, if not of unity, is visible in the art of the various European peoples, tinged as it is with the characteristics of nationality, we are denied even this outward bond of union. Made up of elements gathered together from all quarters of the globe, and not yet fused into one homogeneous mass,—sending our students abroad year after year to study in all the art-centres of Europe, and therefore influenced by all the art-schools in existence,—it is unavoidable that our art should present a diffuseness and want of concentration which must, at first sight, be puzzling to the beholder.

Naturally enough, we are apt to regret this state of things, to deplore this division of our

power, which expends itself in innumerable directions, and to look back longingly to the great achievements of past centuries, which we are accustomed to think of as more favored than our own epoch. But we shall, perhaps, find some consolation in the knowledge gleaned from history, that the unity which we admire cannot endure forever, and that it is, indeed, the forerunner of decline. The period of striving and of effort is the period of youth; the moment of achievement signalizes the beginning of decay. When the art of the Renaissance was at its height, when the temporal power of the Church seemed secured forever, the legend of the Tower of Babel realized itself in history. The shrine of St. Peter was designed to be the central point of the one universal faith which dreamed itself the mistress of the world, a landmark for all the nations of the earth; but before the great dome was reared upon its foundations, a confusion, not of tongues, but of creeds, had taken place, and the peoples, instead of turning to Rome in silent adoration, turned away from her, and wandered forth into the world of thought. And the confusion that fell upon the minds of men fell also upon art.

When we attempt to generalize from the facts of history, we look about us for points of comparison, and, to be able to understand our own time, we would fain seek its counterpart in the epochs of the past. But history never really repeats itself, in spite of the old saw that there is nothing new under the sun. In pessimistic moods an American especially might be apt to compare the age we live in with that of the declining Roman republic. But except in the fact that then, as now, doubt had taken hold of thinking minds, the two epochs are far from offering any parallels. The greatest difference is, that, while then the tendency was towards despotism as the terrible remedy for ills which seemed otherwise incurable, the tendency now is towards a larger measure of liberty. We may believe with Gervinus that, as the Greek states passed from the *tyrannis* to more democratic forms of government, so we also are emerging from an era of despotism into an era of freedom. But if this should be so, art cannot be on the decline. On the contrary, we may rest our hope in the faith that we are climbing the hill. Never forgetting that "all comparisons halt," we might be tempted to say that the condition of art at the present day is somewhat similar to that which prevailed in the glorious days of the early Renaissance. At that time, to quote Mr. Symonds once more, "the whole intellectual conditions" of Italy "were those of growth, experiment, preparation, and acquisition, rather than of full accomplishment." The artists were deeply "occupied with lessons in perspective and anatomy"; they had broken with the traditions of their predecessors, and were "bent upon realizing some special quality of beauty, expressing some fantastic motive, or solving some technical problem of peculiar difficulty." We also have broken with the traditions of the past. To reach the peculiar excellence of some great artist, to think the thoughts of some revered master, and to mould these thoughts in his forms, is no longer our aim. Although our efforts are aided by the study of the works of those who have gone before us, we are yet striving for means of expression peculiar to ourselves, and hence the great preponderance of the technical element in our art, which adds another cause to those before named as tending to obscure the ideal. But it must again be emphasized that the ideal is nevertheless present, although it may require a more discerning spirit, a more subtle power of analysis, a finer, more intuitive nature to perceive it in a few square inches of canvas representing some mysterious effect of light and air, than in a fresco covering a whole wall, and containing life-size figures. Those who run may read such a handwriting, but to understand the other one must stop and ponder.

Possibly the time may come again when humanity—meaning thereby that part of humanity to which we ourselves belong, and which in our arrogance and pride we are wont to look upon as the whole—shall rally around a common ideal, or shall see the ideal under one common aspect, and then we may hope that the technical knowledge which we are now striving to lay up, will stand our successors in good stead in their efforts to give form to the "great art" of the future.

S. R. KOEHLER.